

The Cave of the Heart

The Life of Swami Abhishiktananda

SHIRLEY DU BOULAY

OM

Where no longer is any place
where no longer is any time
where no longer is any thought
where no longer is any word
in the Silence
from where proceeds the Word
the Supreme gathering place
the highest step of the Lord
full of honey.

—Abhishiktananda
(Inscribed in a copy of his book
*Hindu-Christian Meeting Point:
Within the Cave of the Heart.*)

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Chronology

- 1910 August 30. Born in Saint Briac, Brittany
- 1921 Entered minor seminary at Châteaugiron
- 1924 Mother nearly died in childbirth
- 1926 Entered major seminary at Rennes
- 1929 October 15. Entered l'Abbaye Sainte-Anne de
Kergonan
- 1930 May 13. Began his year as a novice
- 1931 May 17. Profession of simple vows
- 1935 May 30. Final profession
December 21. Ordained priest
- 1939 September. Outbreak of World War II. Henri called up
for military service
- 1940 July. Captured, escaped, returned to monastery
- 1944 Death of his mother
- 1948 July 26. Left France for India
August 15. Arrived at Colombo
August 17. Joined Fr. Monchanin in Kulittalai
- 1949 First visit to Sri Ramana Maharshi at Arunachala
- 1950 March 21. Inauguration of Shantivanam Ashram
Took new name and became Abhishikteshvarananda
- 1952 Long periods at Arunachala
- 1953 Met Harilal (Poonja)
- 1954 November. Sudden death of his father
- 1955 July to January 1956. Spiritual crisis. Met Dr. Mehta
- 1956 February. Met Sri Gnanananda
September. Five weeks of silence in Mauna Mandir
- 1957 May. Met Raimon Panikkar
October 10. Death of Fr. Monchanin
- 1957/1958 Theological conferences at Shantivanam
- 1958 January. Granted indefinite renewal of his edict of
exclaustration
- 1959 First visit to the Himalayas. Met Jyotiniketan
Community

- 1961–1963 The “Cuttat Meetings,” ecumenical and interfaith gatherings
- 1961 November. Meeting of the WCC in Delhi
- 1963/1964 Pilgrimages to the sources of the Ganges
- 1968 August. Left Shantivanam, intending to live in a hut in Gyansu in the Himalayas
- 1969 All India Seminar, Bangalore
Arrived at Gyansu
- 1971 October. Marc Chaduc arrived in India
- 1973 July 14. Heart attack
December 7. Death

1

Roots in Brittany

1910–1929

*I am terribly, terribly, French.*¹

IS IT FANCIFUL TO MAKE AN ASSOCIATION between someone's birthplace and the life that lies ahead of them? Probably. Nevertheless, to wander around Saint Briac, the small town in the region of Ille et Vilaine on the north coast of Brittany where Henri Le Saux was born, is to be filled with thoughts not so much of his outer life as of the deepest needs and urges that were eventually to dominate his life. A gull, caught in the slipstream of the wind and drifting across the sky, at one with all around it, the epitome of unity. The sea beneath, symbol of the deep unconscious, the arena of turbulent activity and primal passions, reminder of the old proverb, "The Bretons are born with the waters of the sea flowing around their hearts." To walk on the Pointe de la Garde-Guérin, the local beach where the family played as children, to wander around the town and savor its quiet peace, its stone buildings built to last, is to taste the longing simply *to be* that was to dominate the life of the boy who was born here as Henri Le Saux and died as Swami Abhishiktananda, a hermit living in the Himalayas in silence and solitude. A man who, in his fifties, on the twenty-ninth anniversary of his first solemn communion at Saint Briac, was to write in his diary, "Whether you like it or not, it is always around childhood impressions that everything else later on gets collected. The impressions of a child are absolutes: school, family etc. . . ." ²

The Le Saux family came originally from Britain, leaving Wales in the twelfth century and coming to Brittany—in fact, the name Le Saux in the Breton language means "the Saxons." (The normal pronunciation is "So," but one of Henri's sisters remembers, with some scorn, a branch of the family who insisted on pronouncing it "Le Socks.") Alfred Le Saux

was of seafaring stock, but his mother had lost her father, her brother, two husbands, and a son at sea; one can understand her reluctance to encourage another son to go to sea, and Alfred did not take much persuading to find a job on land.

He married Louise Sonnefraüd, whose family had lived in Alsace. Her father came originally from Austria, but during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 he had somehow found his way through enemy lines and joined the French army. Eventually he left his family in Alsace and settled in Saint Briac, his daughter Louise marrying Alfred Le Saux in 1905.

Alfred and Louise started a shop, selling groceries. It was a corner shop, with a colorful mosaic over the door with its name, À LA PROVIDENCE DE DIEU, stylishly inscribed over the shop front. (The shop still exists today, using the same name, though it is now a gift shop.) Though they were very dependent on the summer season, the shop was a success and Alfred became one of the richest men in town, replacing his horse and cart with a Ford car long before it was commonplace and being the first in the town to have a telephone. He was gassed and wounded in the legs in the First World War, so on his return home his physical activity was limited and he walked with sticks. He was convinced that he would have been killed, were it not that in his knapsack was a piece of palm from the recent Palm Sunday celebration. The French traditionally use something more shrubby and substantial than the thin piece of palm leaf frond used in Britain, so this could have been more than a devout speculation. Alfred would drive the car and make the deliveries while Louise ran the shop. Women were beginning to have a more significant role in society, even replacing the men who were at war, but this would have been less noticeable in Brittany, as even in normal times so many of the men were at sea. Between them, Alfred and Louise sold groceries, wine, whiskey, cheese, a few vegetables—“all the good stuff” as his daughters proudly remember. Some of their best customers were English, for at the time many people who had worked with the Indian civil service retired to Saint Briac, taking advantage of the weak franc and strong pound that prevailed at the time. So the background of Henri’s later asceticism was a large shop full of gastronomic delights—salamis hanging from the ceiling, bottles of wine and cognac on the shelves, and, pervading everything, the aroma of good coffee.

The shop is on the corner of a long, well-built, and beautifully proportioned stone house, the windows outlined in brick, running the length of a short street called Le Passage de la Coulée. It is in the center of town, behind the post office, and for many years it was home to the Le Saux family. Nearly a hundred years later it is still there, the only outward

change being a small additional house at the far end. And it still belongs to the Le Saux family, divided into sections to give various members a degree of independence from each other. Sometimes as many as four members of the family have lived here at the same time, each with their respective spouses and children. Louis Montagnon, one of Louise and Alfred's grandchildren, remarked with a mixture of pride and wry amusement, "It was a clan. They were a real clan—the Le Saux at Briac. A big family, that's one thing—it can explode, fall apart. But a clan . . . Never!"³ They lived the life of the extended family, today in Europe something more talked about than practiced.

And they are Bretons—that should never be forgotten. Louis and his wife, Véronique, live in Saint Briac, and like many of the family their children all have Breton names, Noalig, Gwennenn and Tugdual. Though there is said to be little difference between being French and being Breton, pride and national consciousness creep in, perhaps almost unconsciously. For instance, twelve-year-old Tugdual, when asked the difference between the French and the Bretons, replied, only half jokingly, "The Bretons are much more intelligent." Even his more restrained father admits, "We are a people with a certain culture—a culture which has been crushed to some extent, but which is anyway quite rich. Now the French State is more tolerant and lets us live in harmony with our surroundings. It's not a question of a passport, but a feeling of belonging to a people. It's like Wales and the Welsh. In fact the national song of Brittany is the same as the Welsh National Anthem."⁴ His wife, Véronique, feels that in a way France has colonized Brittany and she recalls the statue that used to be opposite the town hall in Rennes, the regional capital of Brittany; it represented Brittany kneeling humbly before France. Just before the Second World War, to the delight of many patriotic Bretons, it was blown up.

Just a minute's walk from the house belonging to the Le Saux clan is the great stone church, most of which was built in the nineteenth century. The original seventeenth-century church was paid for by the local fishermen, something we are reminded of by the carved fishes on plaques around the outside of the church, and by a dramatically placed boat that used to hang above the entrance door. It was eventually moved, lest it fell on someone's head, and now hangs less conspicuously in the north aisle. Just as fishing, the main trade of the town, is in evidence, so is the fact that we are in Brittany, for on one side of the altar stands a statue of St. Tugdual, one of the seven founders of Brittany; on the other is his disciple, St. Briac, whose life is depicted in the stained glass of the windows.

Today the church is still well used, and most Saturdays a wedding is

celebrated there—though not always between locals—Parisians consider it *très chic* to be married in Brittany.

ALFRED AND LOUISE HAD WAITED five years for their first child; they were to wait many more for their second, so the birth of this boy was an event of even more than usual significance. He was born on August 30, 1910, and taken the very same day to the local church, where he was christened Henri Hyacinthe Joseph Marie. For seven years he was the only child, forming a relationship with his mother of an intimacy that was gentle and touching and, perhaps unusually in such a very close mother-son relationship, gave no evidence of being anything but entirely healthy. Henri and his father got on well enough, but Alfred comes off as a shadowy figure, a good man and remembered by Henri's sister Rénée as “not at all hard on us, no, not at all.”

One of the remarkable things about Henri's early life was his relationships with his family. In 1917, a girl was born, named Louise after her mother but known as Louissette, and over the next thirteen years the family grew to seven, the last child, Marie-Thérèse, being born in 1930 when Louise was forty-five years old. In between were three more girls—Rénée, Marie-Josèphe, and Anne-Louise—and in 1920 another boy, Hyacinthe, who seems to be something of a mystery. The family is reluctant to talk about him, saying only, “He was a bit bizarre, a bit different—a bit disturbed if you like. It's better not to talk about him—it was a bit of a saga in the family.” His mother, however, thought it would be a pity if he changed, as he had such a nice nature.

Henri was a lively and intelligent boy. When he was five he went to the local school, L'École de Sainte-Anne, and was in many ways a typical boy, sometimes a paragon of a son, looking after his younger sisters and brother, helping in the shop, churning the butter on Saturdays; sometimes behaving like any young boy, off with his local friends, climbing the Sailor's Cross at the top of the hill. Being the eldest by seven years—and nineteen when Marie-Thérèse was born—almost inevitably he became in effect a model for his siblings. As they grew up he taught them to swim and played games with them; above all he taught them to sing. He had a harmonium in his room, and, according to Rénée, they would gather around and “he used to make us sing and sing.” They sang Breton songs and Marie-Thérèse still treasures the book they used—Botrel's *Chansons en Sabots*, though Henri may not have realized that Botrel, though a Breton, was a singer from Paris presenting the music from a Parisian perspective. (Ironically the Breton music heard today is, for the most part,

more traditional, not less.) In the light of Henri's long absence from France, some of the songs have a particular poignancy.

Adieu donc, cher petit Parson!
Adieu, pays de mon Enfance!
Adieu donc, cher petit Parson,
Vieux amis et vieille maison!
Votre gâs, demain, s'en vie
En exil, au pays de France,*
Votre gâs, demain, s'en ira;
Seul, Dieu sait quand il reviendra!†

Despite the years spent away from the place of his birth—though it could have been a case of absence making the heart grow fonder—the family is agreed that of all the Le Saux family it was Henri who was the most proud of his national identity. Perhaps this indicated a rebellious streak in him, for in his youth Breton culture was not encouraged—it was even suppressed, though not as fiercely as in, for instance, Finistère. At school the Bretons were mildly despised, and the boys were forbidden to speak the Breton language; those who did risked being made to wear a clog or a wooden plaque as punishment. While his mother and his siblings were fairly indifferent to their Breton blood, Henri was deeply attached to it, joining the celebrations when the monument in Rennes, so humiliating to Brittany, was blown up. Even in his sixties, when Agnès and her fiancé went to see him in India, she remembers him telling her the dates of the joining of Brittany to France. (The agreement was finally ratified in 1532.) Up to the end of his life he was moved beyond words by the music of Brittany. Once he was asked if he would “sing us a song of your dandy youth” by someone who began to hum a Breton sea-song;

*Before Brittany was united to France, France would have seemed like another country.

†Farewell then, dear little person!
Farewell, country of my childhood!
Farewell then, dear little
Old friends and old house!
To-morrow your little lad leaves,
Exiled to the country of France.
Your little lad, to-morrow, goes,
Alone. God knows when he will return!

(From Théodore Botrel, *Chansons en Sabots* [Paris: Editions de la Lyre Chansonnière, 1943])

he broke down in tears and pleaded with the singer to stop—he could not bear it. As he admitted to his great friend, Murray Rogers, despite everything that he experienced, despite the totality of his immersion in India, he remained “terribly, terribly, French.” There may be some who feel he should have said that he remained “terribly, terribly, Breton.”

He carried out his unsought position as role model for his younger siblings with great love and, one might say, skill, if that were not to imply a degree of calculation that was not in his nature. His sister *Rénée* still remembers, “If we wanted to confide in someone, it was to Henri we turned rather than our father. So if Henri was not at home, we would write to him.”⁵ This feeling extended to the next generation, who never met him but who heard about their “legendary uncle.” His niece *Agnès* was so captivated by what she heard that many years later not only did she and her fiancé go to see him in India, but she became the careful and meticulous guardian of the family correspondence, one of those who managed to decipher his often almost indecipherable handwriting. So too it extends to her brother *Louis*, who during his life wrote to his uncle every month, even though they had never met, to his children, and to his wife, *Véronique*, who humbly calls herself “only a relation by extension” but who knows as much about him as anyone in the family.

In fact, everyone in the family remembers their “*Oncle Henri*”—*Louis*, whose physical likeness to his uncle is so great that *Henri*’s friend and biographer, *James Stuart*, was “bowled over”—says that each of them felt they had a privileged relationship with him. “I think each one had a feeling that they had a special relationship with him, and each relationship was different, one from another. He knew how to respect the personalities of each of my aunts. He never showed any preference for one over the other.”⁶ One sister, however, admits to a “slightly ambiguous” relationship with her brother, recalling how “the son dominated the father”—a curious remark about someone as apparently undominating and gentle as *Henri*, adding that “once he became a *curé* he had every right, but. . . .” Her silence is eloquent; *Henri*’s growing dominance of his family occasionally attracted resentment, especially after they married. “*Henri* was a priest so he could do anything he liked and tell the entire family what to do. . . . Well we had our own home and we had our own lives to lead.”⁷ But small resentments apart, he was devoted to his family, loving and being loved and keeping up with them all his life, writing regularly from wherever he was and, though thousands of miles away, helping them with the various situations they found themselves in. For instance when *Louis*’ parents were disappointed that he did not pursue the religious calling they had hoped for him, it was *Henri* who helped

them to accept it and allow their son to follow his own path. Louis feels that Henri was neither a saint nor an eccentric, but was “definitely someone from a higher place, so to speak.”

THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY was a time when a huge percentage of the population of Brittany was Roman Catholic, weekly church attendance was compulsory, and to go to Mass daily not unusual. Yet even in such a climate the Le Saux family were exceptionally devout, above all Alfred. In fact Alfred was considered to be ostentatious about his faith and was known rather mockingly in the town as “Le petit Jésus”; more kindly he was dubbed “the saint” by a small boy noticing how frequently he went to church—three times on Sundays. He even had a prie-dieu in the church with his name on it—a traditional custom for the pious rich. Their devoutness extended into every detail of their lives, even though they were too busy running the shop to go to Mass every day. The name of the shop was almost certainly meant to imply *A la Providence de Dieu* and “when they had gâteaux on Sundays, there was always, always, a bit put aside for the poor. It was part of sharing. There was always a bit left uneaten, just in case someone came.”⁸ So too the weather was in the hands of God. One year there was a terrible drought, so the curé held special services to intercede for rain, expressing penitence and admitting the sinfulness of the people of Saint Briac by singing Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, with its guilt-ridden lines, more appealing to Christians a hundred years ago than now—“For I acknowledge my transgression; and my sin is ever before me. . . . Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.” The intercessions were all too successful and there was so much rain that Saint Briac was badly flooded and poor little Hyacinthe sobbed “it’s all the Miserere’s fault.”

The great festivals of the church marked their lives as clearly as they marked the seasons, and the family would also attend mission services in the parish church. On the feast of Corpus Christi the children used to walk in the procession, Henri donning a sheepskin and becoming, for a few hours, John the Baptist. And every year on August 15, the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, there was a pilgrimage from Saint Briac to the nearby Chapelle de l’Epine; the entire congregation would walk there, singing, all the way from the church. The little stone chapel, in the middle of a field, was built on the spot where a peasant had found a statue of the virgin in a thornbush. Tradition has it that he took the statue home for the night, but it disappeared and was found again the following day, back in the thornbush.

Then, of course, there were the *Pardons*, the local manifestations of

popular fervor, which are thought to be as much as a thousand years old. The faithful—in those days almost the entire population—walked, sometimes for miles, to seek forgiveness, fulfill a vow, or beg for grace. The great *Pardons* can be very impressive, but often it is the smaller ones that are the most fervent—like one at Beg-Miel, where the procession goes down to the seashore and sails away in little boats. Tourists tend to hope that they will see traditional Breton dress being worn, and sometimes they will, especially in the regions of Finistère and Morbihan. Saint Briac used to have its own costume, with a headdress known as “the cock” which Henri’s grandmother wore at his parents’ wedding, but by Henri’s time it was no longer worn. In fact there is now a sneaking suspicion that wearing traditional dress is cultivated as a tourist attraction.

The Le Saux’s were a close family, on the whole loving each other and looking back on what was, by any standards, a happy childhood. It comes as no surprise to discover that, fifty years later, Henri wrote to his friend Anne-Marie, “It seems only yesterday that we were ten, eleven years old—that wonderful age! And everything else seems to have overlaid it, like a cloak that you have put on for a long journey.”⁹

WHEN HE WAS JUST FIVE, Henri went to the local school, the *École de Sainte-Anne*, just half a mile from the Le Saux family house. (It still serves as the local primary school.) Signs of his calling to the priesthood must have begun to show early, for in October 1921, when he was eleven, his parents sent him to the *Petit Séminaire de Châteaugiron*, a beautiful old town twenty-five kilometers southeast of Rennes. The seminary took children from ten to eighteen years old, and at this stage there was no assumption that they would enter the priesthood, but the option was there—perhaps even a gentle expectation—and the syllabus included the appropriate studies.¹⁰

Already it is clear that Henri was an outstanding pupil, always among the top pupils of his class, and in June 1926 he passed the first part of the *baccalauréat*, for which the boys had to study a minimum of nine subjects. In order to go on to the *Grand Séminaire* there were certain criteria the boys had to fulfill, and two of the comments listed in Henri’s files shed an interesting light on him as a teenager. Under the heading “Judgment” the entry reads, “Good, with a tendency to paradox”; and under “Character,” again “Good,” but surprisingly, given the huge family he grew up with, there is the addition “but very shy.”

Perhaps he was not so much shy as unhappy and homesick. Years later he wrote to his family to dissuade them from sending his nephew Louis to the seminary, or at least to keep him at home until he was twelve:

I still have wretched memories of Châteaugiron. Even apart from being separated from St Briac, it was so old-fashioned. Not even a room for showers (whereas here, anyone who does not take a daily bath is simply disgusting!), such a narrow training (one year, the order came that our shorts should cover the knees!—our dear professors probably had bad thoughts from seeing our knees), etc. However, if I had not been there, should I have kept my vocation?¹¹

Throughout his life he became more and more opposed to “this ‘ghetto’ education which has done such damage to the Church”¹² and in a later letter about his nephew he wrote: “The trouble with these seminaries is that the future priests are terribly cut off from reality. The day when they go for military service or are sent to parishes, they are absolutely ‘lost.’” And writing to a nun friend he admitted, “Personally I needed years to free myself (if indeed I have done so even now) from the infantilism and the lack of a sense of personal responsibility, which was effectively instilled into me on the pretext of obedience.”¹³

While he was at the minor seminary something happened that seems to have been one of the determining events in his young life. His mother nearly died giving birth to a child, the sixth, which itself did not survive. A year later another child was expected and Henri, devoted to his mother as he was, was terrified that this time she might actually die. So terrified was he that his prayers for her would end with the promise that, if she were to survive, he would dedicate his life to the service of the Lord and would go wherever he was sent, even to the most distant mission. (James Stuart suggests that he was thinking here of his uncle, his mother’s brother, Henri Sonnefraüd, who as a member of the Foreign Missionary Society of Paris, was sent to China in 1923.) Rénée remembers, “You felt that he had given over his life because he was so frightened of losing Maman. He loved Maman so much and he was so frightened of losing her—so he sacrificed himself.”

The feeling that he had a vocation to the priesthood, already flickering in his consciousness, was fanned by this experience; he had fulfilled the necessary criteria for entry to the seminary. So in September 1926, at only sixteen the youngest of the thirty-nine new pupils, he took the next step in the direction of the priesthood by entering the major seminary at Rennes. (A reflection on the changing times—in Henri’s time his group of thirty-nine joined about 150 seminarians already there; today there is a total of ten.)

First he had to complete the last year of his baccalauréat, and in July 1927 he passed with the second prize in science, honorable mentions in

philosophy and history, and a report that noted that he was a very good pupil though, without any explanation for the criticism, it complained that he “behaved badly in the refectory.” Curiously, these apparently distinguished marks were only awarded an overall *Assez Bien*—the equivalent of little more than a pass.

In those days life as a seminarian was hard. The day began at five o’clock in the morning with a time of personal prayer, and Mass was celebrated at six o’clock. They started studying at the curiously precise time of 7:25, and lessons began at eight o’clock, with lunch taken at noon, in silence. It was a time when the regular admission of sin was part of religious life, and every day, as they returned to the chapel after lunch, they sang the *Miserere*, the great penitential psalm that little Hyacinthe was convinced had caused the flooding of Saint Briac. And so the day went on with studies and lessons from 1:30 to 6:55, when they all gathered to recite the rosary and listen to a lecture on some spiritual subject before the evening meal. Night prayer was at 8:35 and lights had to be out by nine o’clock.

By today’s standards—indeed by any standards—it was a hard and exacting life for a sixteen-year-old boy, yet clearly Henri was happy at the major seminary, far happier than he had been at Châteaugiron. His teachers commented on the great change in him, noting that he was drawn more to piety than to rules and that he was a little critical. They also commented on his defective pronunciation, something that persisted throughout his life and was probably caused by a slight harelip; his friends would affectionately divide themselves into those who could hear him better if they were sitting opposite him and those who preferred to sit slightly to one side.

The second year the seminarians’ studies were concentrated on philosophy; the third and last was the year of apologetics. In the light of the direction in which his spirituality was to go, this has an ironic twist, for the study of apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith on intellectual grounds, traditionally falls into three parts: to show that it is reasonable to have a religion, to prove that Christianity is the most rational of all the religions, and to demonstrate that orthodox Christianity is the best of all its various forms. Religious competitiveness was to become so foreign to Henri Le Saux that it is curious to imagine him having to study it.

In his final year he won the first prize in history, scripture, and theology and second in liturgy, coming second overall among his contemporaries. In fact he did so well that there was pressure for him to continue his studies in Rome. By then his mind was made up, and his file notes laconically, “très bon séminariste, esprit bien meilleur, va entrer chez les

Bénédictins” (very good seminarian, much better attitude, going to become a Benedictine).

BUT IT WASN'T AS SIMPLE as those easily written words imply; for nearly two years the subject of Henri's vocation was to become a battleground among many forces. It was a big decision, one of the most important of his life, and ranged against him were his family, the archbishop of his diocese, the abbot of his chosen monastery, and, most of all, his own initial ambivalence.

Though the seed had been sown when he was only fourteen years old, when he had vowed that he would dedicate himself to the Lord's service if his mother survived her seventh pregnancy, the probability was that at that stage he was thinking in terms of becoming a diocesan priest, with the likelihood of remaining near Saint Briac and his beloved family. But two years later, at the major seminary, he struck up a close friendship with a fellow seminarist whose great desire was to become a Benedictine monk. Shortly after sharing these thoughts with Henri, his friend unexpectedly died, leaving Henri convinced that he had inherited his friend's vocation to become a monk.

In the autumn of 1928 he visited the Benedictine Abbey of Sainte-Anne of Kergonan, on the south side of Brittany, nearly two hundred kilometers from Saint Briac. Three months later, he wrote to the novice master the first of six letters that survive, though possibly in draft form.

He tells the novice master that his director at the seminary seemed to agree that he should follow his feeling that he had a vocation to the cloister, though he did not say so explicitly, suggesting that the end of the year would be the time for a decision. This advice was exactly the same as he had received from the novice master when he visited the monastery. By December 1928 the time for a decision had come.

Overflowing with youthful idealism and drawn to the hope of finding the presence of God more fully in the cloister than anywhere else, Henri was filled with joy at the thought. And yet . . . and yet . . . often he felt downcast and worried at the thought of the pains of monastic life. Most of all he dreaded leaving home and was realistic about the full implications of poverty: “I like to have things of my own, to have things which in some sense complete my ‘I,’ but in the monastery I have to feel that none of the things that I use belongs to me.”¹⁴ So too, sociable by nature, he dreaded the prospect of having to avoid human society and was apprehensive at the thought of the monotony with which one day would follow another, almost identical.

He felt an irresistible call, yet he was realistic, seeing how much there

is in the monastic life that is hard to bear. It is touching to see him struggle, asking the novice master “to repeat for me your original judgment,”¹⁵ showing that he was still at the stage of decision making where confirmation from outside was needed, the inner voice not yet strong enough to make up its own mind. “I have need to be persuaded myself; however much I act as one who must soon follow the call of God, it seems to me so incredible that I should soon become a monk, that I dare not accept the idea.”¹⁶

Soon after writing this letter he made his decision and, at Christmas, he told his parents. They were devout; they had brought him up to be devout and had sent him to the minor seminary, which carried a strong possibility of leading to the religious life—surely they would be delighted? They were not. “They were in despair . . . the blow has been terrible. They were in such a state of depression and anguish when I left them yesterday morning I had to give them hope that I would wait.”¹⁷ They were distressed not only at the thought of losing their eldest son but that there would be no one to look after their young family if they were to be sick or to die before their time. Louise, the eldest, was only eleven; there were the youngest three, and Marie-Thérèse was not even born. (If the implications about Hyacinthe are true, he would not have been able to cope, even when he was old enough, and he was only nine at the time.)

Other problems emerged, though much milder and less emotional—mere pebbles by comparison to the great boulders of family grief. It turned out that the archbishop did not like his seminarists to become monks until they had served the diocese for several years as priests, and the abbot of Kergonan preferred his novices to do their military service before they entered the novitiate. At the end of January 1929, he wrote to the novice master again. The surviving letter, almost certainly a draft and even harder to read than normal, indicates that he had agreed to wait for seven years, until his sister was old enough to take responsibility for the family in the event of their parents’ death; in the meanwhile he could satisfy the abbot’s wishes by doing his military service during this time. His great dread was that this long delay might result in his losing his vocation—something he could only have feared if his mind was not completely made up.

Henri’s acceptance of his fate seems to have softened the opposition, as one by one the barriers were lifted. His parents became resigned to the thought of their eldest son becoming a monk, placated partly by his promise that in his first five years at the monastery he could, if they needed him, revert to the secular ministry and move nearer home. The

archbishop gave him permission to leave the diocese, and the abbot of Kergonan relaxed his restrictions on military service. Henri's sister R  n  e remembers that his mother's disapproval was softened partly by her fear that her son's great intelligence might lead him to pride and arrogance. She prayed hard that he would stay out of the limelight and might have thought her prayers were answered; after all, as his sister reflected years later, "Well you know, a monk at Kergonan, he's not going to get very famous is he?"

Through all these exchanges about his vocation runs Henri's piety, expressed in the language of his day and undoubtedly sincere: for instance, he is grateful for "the touching solicitude with which the good God binds up our wounds and gently inclines the soul to his holy will."¹⁸ So too does his idealism color every thought. In his first letter to the novice master he writes: "I have a very ambitious spirit—and this is permissible, is it not? when it is a matter of seeking God—and I hope I shall not be disappointed."¹⁹ Already he has noted that to be a monk is not necessarily to be virtuous, and he is thinking in terms of raising the standards of monastic life: "In becoming a monk I have a great ambition; and the way that God has used me to bring me to this had been above all the sight of the mediocrity into which so many priests lapse after a few years in the ministry, and which at all costs I want to avoid."²⁰ Looking back on the course of his vocation, and showing a remarkable maturity for his years, he marveled at the way, in facing the problems that presented themselves, he became slowly detached from any natural attachment to the cloister and came to see in entering the religious life nothing but the naked will of God:

In all this I seem to be so much like a pawn, so to speak, and to be living in a kind of dream. I didn't understand—and less than ever do I now understand—all the steps that I am taking. I can neither convince myself, nor can I even imagine, that I shall end this year in a monastery, and this idea seems to my natural mind both horrible and futile; but I feel myself driven by something which does not allow me to draw back or turn aside, and compels me, almost in spite of myself, to throw myself into the unknown which I see opening before me.²¹

His sisters had seen how hard it was for him to accept his vocation, one of them remembering him in his room, at the harmonium, clenching his fists and saying, "My God, you can't possibly ask that of me!" But once he had made his decision, he set about his new way of life with utter single-

mindfulness and dedication. Indeed, Murray Rogers, who knew him well in later life, says that his singlemindedness is as much a key to his character as the fact that he was “terribly French.”

It had taken nearly two years, but at last all obstacles were removed and he was free to follow his vocation. But as Oscar Wilde is said to have remarked, “There is only one thing worse than not getting what you want and that is getting it.” Just as he had found it hard to accept his vocation—though harder still to deny it—so now he found it hard to accept the pain his decision was causing to his parents and friends. He so dreaded having to talk to his parents about his imminent departure to the monastery that on one visit home he admitted that a fire in the shop was a welcome diversion, preoccupying the family and freeing him from the need to discuss his future. He wrote to Raymond Macé, a friend he had made at the seminary who was to become canon of Rennes, of his sorrow:

Believe me, that is the worst sorrow of those who go away: to abandon parents and friends, to give up an easy life, is hard and at times extremely painful, but even so in fact the sacrifice is easy to make. . . . Only when it is a question of imposing the sacrifice on those who are dear to us! Can anything be worse than that?²²

By the summer his mother was pregnant again, which may have taken her mind a little from her sadness. But her grief was still so great that Marie-Thérèse, the child who was to be born four months later, wondered, years later, as an elderly religious sister, if she had felt its repercussions and that perhaps her vocation was born in that unhappy womb? So Henri’s last holiday at home was painful and depressing, and the time for his departure to Kergonan must have come with some relief. On October 18, 1929,²³ just nineteen years old, he entered the Benedictine monastery at Kergonan.